

THE APPEAL
OF
ANGLICAN CATHOLICISM
TO
AN AVERAGE MAN



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THE APPEAL OF ANGLICAN CATHOLICISM TO AN AVERAGE MAN

HERE, briefly told, is the story of my religious development. By way of introducing myself it is enough to say that my name is Andrew, and that in most respects I am just an average fellow—a native born American, a college graduate, now middle aged and happily married with two satisfactory offspring. I am earning an adequate but not luxurious living in the business world. As a boy I was brought up, like many an average youngster, in an evangelical Protestant home with a pious tradition and a warm feeling of security.

Until I was about twelve years of age I took for granted the family pattern of religious belief. After that time, as youngsters frequently do, I started to think for myself. It was then that my own individual religious quest commenced.

One of my earliest puzzles even before the age of twelve, related to the Apostles' Creed which I heard recited every Sunday in the service. The

congregation spoke of believing in the "Holy Catholic Church." But surely the Catholic Church was situated yonder across the railroad tracks and was distinguished chiefly for its outlandish ceremonies and for the queer looking immigrants who attended them.

Asking my father for enlightenment, I was fascinated to learn that, although many denominations existed, there was historically the one great inclusive body of the Church to which all baptized people belonged. Although I could not have been more than ten at that time, I comprehended the answer and found highly satisfactory this acknowledgment of the unity of Christendom in spite of superficial division and disagreement. I imagined the great power that would exist if all members of the Holy Catholic Church forgot their differences and came together, and wondered why they didn't. Catholicity—universality—meant something to me even at the age of ten. As a matter of fact Catholicity is an idea, I firmly believe, that appeals to children, for children have not yet developed separatist habits nor self-exalting prejudices.

But I soon lost this early glimpse of the historic unity of the Church. The prejudices of my class and of my family were too much for me, and I was persuaded that Catholics were benighted and ignorant mortals unhappily denied the enlightenment of my own superior culture. My mind became

closed on the subject, and, if I thought any more about Catholicism for many years, it was with impatience for people who could not or would not use their brains to good advantage.

I was convinced that there was nothing wrong with my brain. Though not a particularly religious child, I liked to use my wits to test the theological and moral teaching of my own church. As I approached adolescence I discovered that our denomination placed considerable emphasis upon conversion and acts of decision. I was prodded to "join the Church." The more I was prodded the more I resisted. For one thing I was a self-conscious lad and shied away from public avowals; for another I wasn't convinced that the doctrine was true, or that any personal advantage would come from church membership.

High school age for me was an irreligious period. I gave up my childhood prayers, and my attendance at church became rare and then only a way of appeasing my "old-fashioned" parents. As my youthful horizon broadened, sustained by good health and a conviction that the bland pleasures of youth would go on forever, I became more and more trustful of my own brain-processes. "Who knows whether there is a God anyhow?" I asked myself. "Where is proof?"

Thus I entered a period of vigorous free-thinking, finding it exhilarating to discard my second-hand

childish beliefs. In particular I didn't see how anyone could possibly accept the Apostles' Creed (of the Nicene Creed I had never heard). Having analyzed it word for word I rejected it. My seventeen year old brain was *so* clear, *so* superior, *so* trustworthy. I did not yet know that it was also literal-minded, humorless, and yet unfurnished with the really significant experiences of life.

* * *

I went to college. Being an eager youth I found all the new ideas I encountered immensely challenging. Philosophy in particular confronted me with a bewildering variety of world-views, far more than I had even known existed. Surely the authors of these systematic world-views were sincere and thoughtful men. There must be something to get from them. I read Epictetus and for a month believed in Stoicism; Epicurus and was for a time a convinced hedonist. Descartes, Leibnitz, Hobbes—they were all momentarily persuasive. But I saw that in the interests of consistency I could scarcely believe them all. Furthermore, they seemed dated. I began to wonder about the contemporary creeds by which men live.

So I began to look around and sample. Half-consciously I was seeking a world-view that would confer meaning upon *all* of my growing experience, and not merely upon this fragment or that. I was not yet certain that a God existed, though I

noted with interest that almost every form of philosophy, and all religions, make this assumption.

In the Boston region where my college was located I found many interesting expressions of mankind's quest for a creed. I visited the Spiritualists, and for a time the Christian Scientists, and then the Unitarians. The latter had the greatest appeal. Here surely was a free and unfettered faith, requiring just enough belief to focus the mind and not enough more to hamper the operations of the intellect. For a while, when I had to fill out college forms, I listed myself as a Unitarian though I had no official relationship to that body.

It was at that point that a classmate unexpectedly asked me to attend the Church of the Advent. "What might that be?" I asked. "An Anglican Church", my friend replied. I had heard of Vedantists and Rosicrucians, but never of Anglicans. But it sounded like an adventure and so I accepted the invitation.

On the way to town my friend explained that this church was not founded, as some believe, by Henry VIII as an episode of the Reformation; but was in fact the English branch of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church reaching back to the primitive Church founded by Christ himself. The idea was startling, for since my childhood I had never thought of the Catholic Church excepting as the

Church of Rome. My flash of insight at the age of ten had in the meantime been forgotten.

The Solemn Mass that I attended was, of course, totally unintelligible to me. I found it confusing, disturbing, but likewise fascinating. Most of all I was impressed by the appearance of devotion which I had never encountered before in any congregation that I had seen. "It must mean something — to them," I thought.

But my mind was not ready for Catholic doctrine. I had a long way to go, and it was many, many years before I again ventured inside the Church of the Advent. I did not know that once I came to believe in God, a long process of gradual conversion to free historic Catholicism was for me inevitable.

But a belief in God did not come overnight. On the contrary, in my case it was a difficult achievement. To be sure, I was somewhat influenced toward belief by the philosophical arguments for the existence of God as they came up in my course in the history of philosophy. Of these, the cosmological argument seemed most impressive. How else, I wondered, could one possibly explain the universe?

I was influenced still more by a few convincing mystical experiences that came to me—usually in the early morning when I arose before my roommates and took a walk by the river. There was

something remarkably direct and vivid about these contacts between myself and Something infinitely bigger than myself. I tried to explain these experiences in terms of my digestive processes, but the explanation was not convincing. If a well-functioning liver and pancreas played a part in the process, I knew that it was more likely to be an *incident* in the experience than its *cause*.

* * *

Gradually I came to the conclusion that probabilities weighed heavily in favor of God's existence, and became still more certain when I observed the power and beauty of the lives of people who had a secure religious faith. To acquire a reasonably firm belief in God was for me, and I presume for most people, the greatest hurdle of all. This barrier of agnosticism once passed prepared for me the way to the acceptance of the fullest and most satisfactory form of theism, namely historic Christianity.

My thought, though I did not know it at the time, was following the same development as that of Keble and Newman. To be absolutely *certain* requires more logical proof than is available for any type of religious belief. Yet only a tiny fraction of our existence rests on certainty. We are never absolutely certain that we shall be alive tomorrow, or that our most intimate friends and relatives will remain loyal to us. Almost everything of

any consequence that we experience rests upon probabilities supported by faith and love. Taken together, it is probability plus faith and love, that engender the kind of mental certitude that religion requires. And so it is that in the human mind something less than logical *certainty* (of which there is very little) turns into true mental *certitude* by which we are enabled to live.

Acquiring in this way a certitude of God, I found that in time (but not immediately) other beliefs seemed naturally to follow. It appeared reasonable that a God, one of whose attributes must be love, should come close to his creatures through the Incarnation. Surely the perfection of Christ's life and teaching were not a mere human production. Such an exalted model could come only from the Heavenly Father.

Having accepted the doctrine of the Incarnation, I could not possibly deny the divine mission of the Church which Christ established on earth. The presence of vast evil in the world surely requires a potentially unlimited power of combating evil.

Must it not be that the Church is God's design for offsetting the ravages of evil in the world? At times, of course, the Church has suffered secular corruption and even added to the earth's store of wickedness, but, by and large, has it not remained the clearest of all channels for the operation of the Holy Spirit?

I do not know why or when evil entered the world, but I do know its antidote—and that I am content to believe, is enough knowledge for me at the moment. Thanks to the Church, people can live a reasonably ordered life in spite of evil. With the aid of the Sacraments they find power to combat it in themselves and to work for its elimination from the world.

The amount of barbed wickedness in my own nature often appalls me. Without the healing philosophy of the Church I suspect I should become a blue-ribbon neurotic.

How I came to discover the Sacrament of Penance is one of those personal stories that seldom get told. Suffice it to say that there were "family troubles" brought about by a physical illness. Now, physical illness is seldom without its mental complications, and sometimes brings, as in this case, accusations, bitterness, estrangement. A priest, who quite incidentally came into the situation, remarked, "I know no technique that will help in such a problem excepting the Sacrament of Penance." At first I was startled. Couldn't the man see *I* was blameless. What *was* he talking about? But suddenly, without his amplifying his view, I understood his meaning. If I could put *my* house in order, if I could see wherein *I* was wrong—not only in the present incident but throughout my prideful life, then, by the grace of God, I would have the clarity

of vision and the necessary humility to steer a course in the troubled waters surrounding me.

My first confession was like a spiritual bath. It not only ordered my existence in a time of trouble, but it clarified for me the Church's theology of sin and forgiveness. I can now see its logic for I have experienced the whole human-divine relationship: the turmoil of pride, the confusion and contrition, and the humiliation of the act of confession itself, and finally the blessed absolution. Going to confession is, however, an exceedingly uncomfortable and even agonizing experience, but still I go every few months, for I agree with Chesterton that "the only way to keep a white post white is to repaint it; leave it alone and it gets black."

* * *

It was in this way that I began to believe in God as a probability, in Christianity as a probability, in the Church as a probability. Together, sustained by faith and love and by direct experience with the Sacraments of the Church, these probabilities turned into a sufficient certitude.

But let no one think that doubts and misgivings miraculously vanished. There are still moments when if some skeptical friend said to me, "Do you really believe all things an Anglo-Catholic is supposed to believe?" I would have to reply, "No, I don't — not yet." The historic faith is rich and

intricate, but I cannot grasp and hold it all at one time. What is more, I still have my naturalistic inclinations and have to deal day by day realistically with the egotism of human nature, (and that is enough to set us all back.) But I plod along (nine steps backward and ten steps forward). To me the plodding seems to be the essential thing. I find profound significance in a legend told by a Moham-medan sage:

A dervish was tempted by the devil to stop calling on Allah because Allah did not answer, "Here am I."

The prophet Khadir appeared to him in a vision with a message from Allah.

"Was it not I who summoned thee to service? Did I not make thee busy with My Name? Thy calling "Allah," was my "Here am I."

In other words, a man's desire or knowledge of God is itself the guarantee that the indwelling God is there.

* * *

I do not maintain that Anglican Catholicism has a monopoly on all grace. It is not the only channel through which the Holy Spirit operates. But important to me is the historical continuity of my communion with the Church founded by Christ. Toward *Roman* Catholicism I have friendly feelings, but cannot escape the conviction that the traditions for the English Church are freer from unwarranted

embellishments and unnecessary restrictions upon the exercise of individual intelligence. At least so it seems to me. Any branch of the Church, I know, may suffer corruption to some extent. I just happen to feel that the Anglican Branch is basically the freest and the clearest. But I would respect those who disagree with me on this point.

One thing about the Church fills me with both admiration and dismay—and that is its quiet insistence upon perfection. The church of my boyhood held morning worship at eleven o'clock on Sundays. At one time there were likewise an evening service and a midweek meeting. For a while movies and entertainment kept the evening services alive, but finally these were abandoned. What is more, there was no sense of discipline that compelled attendance at the one remaining service. Fatigue, golf, or weather was a sufficient excuse for absence. And the services, I noted, grew more and more secular and apologetic in tone.

What do I find in my Catholic parish? For one thing, Daily Offices, morning and evening. Though I seldom attend, I like to think of the fidelity of my clergy to these historic duties. The Church edifice is open all day long, every day—not only on Sundays. It invites those who are over-burdened and bewildered by their daily cares to drop in, and through meditation and prayer to absorb strength and achieve a new perspective. Daily

Mass is a wonderfully comforting thought. Occasionally I arise early to assist before the day's work. Always I am grateful for the quiet celebration that keeps alive every day the remembrance of our Lord.

Being a self-conscious fellow by nature, I am happy to find that in their devotions the people of my parish seem oblivious of one another. For an hour, at Mass, they cease their preening and chattering and staring, and devote themselves to something more important than human clatter. As I kneel with others in the pews, and especially at the altar rail, I find it a blessed relief to lose my rigid pride and join with others on strictly equal terms in offering the Sacrifice. If I were to express the feeling I have, I would say to my fellow worshippers, "you know and I know how little we really understand about ourselves or the world we live in. Your life like my life is badly tangled up. But I know and you know that healing lies in this worship. Let our sorrows and our hopes stream together toward the altar and be sanctified. After Mass we shall go our separate ways. Your road will be difficult for you and mine for me. But we shall struggle on a little stronger and a little wiser. And we shall return again and again to refresh our souls."

Such experiences as these diminish for me the intellectual difficulties that still occasionally arise. I do not know the precise course of theological

reasoning I should follow regarding the significance of the Mass. But I am not greatly troubled, for I know that somehow God reaches me through the Sacrament. The probabilities, I hold, are in favor of the Mass being precisely what it claims to be. It is the way Christ himself chose to come to his followers throughout the ages. "Do this," He said, "in remembrance of me."

* * *

What does trouble me is my inability to live up to the level that the Church continually holds before me. How can I "be perfect" even as our Father in Heaven is perfect? The incessant round of Days of Obligation annoys me. I cannot keep up with them. Furthermore, I dislike abstinence, and confession is a torture. Will the counsels of perfection (as they appear to me to be) never cease? Such standards seem inhuman. They *are* inhuman.

Yet for all my protest, I would not want to be part of a Church that compromised with the weakness and evil in my own nature, or that watered down the injunction of Christ until they fell within easy range of attainment. I know I lag far behind the ideals set before me, but also that salvation lies in directing my thought and my will toward goals that I cannot fully achieve, rather than in achieving goals that result from a lowering of sights and a compromise with evil.

Christianity is the religion of perfection, and for this reason I want the Liturgy rendered in as perfect a manner as possible. Let others, if they will, worship God in austerity and gloom. For my part I know there is holiness in beauty. Nor am I troubled by those who make the taunt that the service is aestheticism in disguise,—that the church puts all of its emphasis upon what they choose to call disdainfully “the etiquette of the sanctuary.” To my way of thinking this thrust is wide of the mark. Suppose the critic is a friend of mine to whom I offer a beautiful gift. Would the critic say, “The very beauty of this gift proves that you don’t care for me, but only for aestheticism?” Not at all, he would see in the beauty of the offering a symbol of the high regard in which I hold him. The more perfect our love the more beautiful must be the gifts by which we endeavor to express it.

I often think that anyone who does not understand the full significance of Catholicism must be perplexed when the stately and historic Liturgy is interrupted after the Creed for a sermon which is often strikingly liberal, or even revolutionary, in its social implications. But there is no inconsistency. Christianity is revolutionary if viewed from the worldly point of view. Full-bodied Catholicism which takes the entire legacy of Christ must fight constantly the selfishness, pride, and social injustice of the world. It is partly because of its general

progressivism that I feel that the Anglican Communion is basically faithful to its Founder. The Church needs at every moment to keep one foot planted solidly in historic faith and practice; while with the other it steps forward into the future. If both feet are planted in the past antiquarianism and sentimentality result. Yet no walker can without disaster plant *two* feet simultaneously in the future. One must be the anchor while the other is advancing.

* * *

When I was a young man I never really believed that I would die. But since that time I have lost parents and many friends. These bereavements and my own advancing age remind me of the destiny that awaits us all. The thought does not frighten me particularly, although it is perplexing. I find myself attracted to the completely adequate and comforting doctrine of Catholicism, and yet I have moments of fearing that I might be thinking wishfully. But again I find myself contemplating probabilities which all through my religious quest have had a way of turning ultimately into certitude.

It seems *improbable* to me that the ardent spirits I have known in this life have ceased abruptly to exist at the moment of death. It seems *improbable* that a merciful God who endows his creatures with aspiration and foresight, and considers each one to be of priceless value, should reverse his decision

concerning the worth of the individual person, at the latter's death. It seems *improbable* that the Church's prayers for the dead throughout the ages and its dependence upon the saints of the past should be all dumb show. The totality of Christianity requires for its completeness the Catholic teaching about life hereafter.

* * *

While I have been groping my way through all these perplexities, I have felt that much of the didactic literature of the Church tends to breed a certain discouragement in an average man like myself. Much of the literature one picks up in the vestibule or reads in church periodicals seems to underestimate the difficulty of achieving a full Catholic faith. Writers, I note, do not allow for the individual perturbations of doubt and difficulty. They seem to assume that belief in God and a perfection of faith are easy to come by. But the uncertain, groping, sinful, average man knows better. He may wish wistfully that he could attain the degree of faith necessary to become a Catholic, but in discouragement he may turn away.

I do not pretend to know exactly how much faith a person must have before he can call himself a Catholic. I am almost afraid to ask a priest, for I do know that my own faith is still incomplete and my practice as a Catholic very deficient. Yet I *feel* that I have a place in the Anglican Com-

munion. "What you long to possess," I tell myself, "is more important for your development than what you already do possess. What you lack in faith you can make up in desire and longing."

I suppose the most significant moment of my religious development came when I reached a clear conviction that so long as my purposes and intent were definite to know more about God and about His Incarnation, then I was entitled to come in humility before the altar and to join in the common quest of men through all ages. Some seekers have been spiritual giants, some have been pigmies, and many, like myself, have been men of average intellect, average sinfulness, and average capacity for love. In an old hymn I found the encouragement I needed:

Fear not to enter His courts in the slenderness
Of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine;
Truth in its beauty, and love in its tenderness,
These are the offerings to lay on His shrine.

Of the slenderness of my own faith, I am keenly aware, but with God's help I intend to perfect it. Of two facts I am absolutely convinced: that striving is the essence of all living, and that striving to know God is the essence of the finest living.

And the Catholic religion, as presented in the Anglican tradition, I find best encompasses my own quest for God. It holds up the necessary vision and standards, while respecting the integrity of my

own mind, so long as I keep it a reasonably humble mind. Without compromise it marks out the way I have chosen to follow and encourages me step by step. It even mercifully lifts me when I fall.

And so at last I have found a world-view, something big enough to embrace all my experience—without remainder. My quest is not yet ended but I am positive of the direction it will continue to take.

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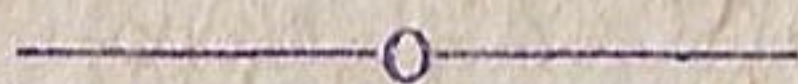
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